The Social Construction of Race

Nov. 6, 2006

http://www.iastate.edu/~soc.134
Sociology Club Movie Night

The movie *Lone Star* will be featured at Sociology Club Movie Night, Thursday, Nov. 9, at 7 p.m. in Coover Hall.

Discussion afterwards will be led by a panel of faculty members.

Dave Schweingruber is hosting.
Race is socially constructed

- Race: category of people labeled and treated as similar because of some common biological traits, such as skin color, texture of hair, and shape of eyes (p. 379)
- These traits are culturally determined
- Race has no “scientific” basis, e.g., DNA
  - Biological variability exists, but doesn’t conform to our “race” categories; racial characteristics aren’t transmitted as complexes
- Race was invented in the 18th Century
- Race and racism have always been connected
Some racial taxonomies

- The ancients: us vs. “barbarians”
- Linnaeus’ taxonomy
- Nazis: important distinction was Aryan vs. Jew
- South African apartheid: four categories (white, black, colored, Indian)
- Brazil: wider range of fluid skin color designations
- United States
  - Most important distinction historically has been white vs. non-white
  - U.S. officially recognizes five races plus “other,” and multiple race combinations
The first “scientific” racial taxonomy

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Linnaeus’ races</th>
<th>Alleged characteristics</th>
<th>Ruled by:</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Homo sapiens</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Americanus</td>
<td>Red, ill-tempered, subjugated</td>
<td>Custom</td>
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<tr>
<td>Asiaticus</td>
<td>Yellow, melancholy, greedy</td>
<td>Opinion</td>
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<tr>
<td>Afer</td>
<td>Black, impassive, lazy</td>
<td>Caprice</td>
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<tr>
<td>Europaeus</td>
<td>White, serious, strong</td>
<td>Laws</td>
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<tr>
<td>Monstrosus</td>
<td>Includes coneheads, flatheads, troglodytes, dwarves &amp; other</td>
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<td></td>
<td>unusual variations</td>
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U.S. racial system complications

✔ The U.S. racial system has focused on the white-nonwhite dichotomy
  • The one drop rule: one drop of black blood (i.e., any percentage of ancestry) makes someone black
  • Until 1967, many states had laws against miscegenation (marriage or sexual relations between a man & a woman of different races)

✔ People and groups move from one racial category to another
  • Because of the one-drop rule, many blacks throughout U.S. history have looked white enough to “pass” as white; this has resulted in a large percentage of whites with black ancestry
  • New immigrant groups, e.g., Irish, Slavs, have been successful in becoming white

✔ Census categories
  • Races: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, Some other race
  • Ethnic category: Hispanic or Latino